

Native Grasses Good for Wildlife— Good for Livestock Forage

Native grasses provide important habitat to grassland wildlife. Several declining species such as grasshopper sparrows, Bobolinks, upland sandpipers, bobwhite quail, and wild ring-necked pheasants thrive in native grasses. Fungi, bacteria and invertebrates found in soil support songbirds, game birds, waterfowl, reptiles, amphibians, and other wildlife that we enjoy also flourish in native grass stands.

Fescues, rye grasses, timothy, orchardgrass, and bluegrass that are among grasses most commonly seen in New Jersey fields are European in origin. They have been growing on our continent for about 350 years, in contrast to native grasses that have been part of New Jersey's landscape since the last glaciation of our state (for tens of thousands of years).

South of New Jersey in Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina, native grasses are routinely grown and harvested by forage producers for valuable hay and pasture crops. Farmers there have replaced fescue pastures and hayfields that produce poor quality and low yields of forage with native warm season grasses.

Native warm season grasses are normally ready to be harvested for hay crops in late July when most traditional cool season grass hay fields are over-mature and lacking good quality forage. Most grassland nesting species have completed their nesting activities by late July. The same field that can produce three tons per acre of grass hay in July or August can also produce several nests per acre of rare grassland bird species in May and June!



Mixed stand of native grasses in June, when they first begin to grow aggressively. This stand will provide nesting cover for several species of declining grassland birds during April-May-June and then can be harvested as a valuable hay crop in late July.



Native Grasses include:

- indiangrass
(*Sorghastrum nutans*)
 - little bluestem
(*Schizachyrium scoparium*)
 - big bluestem
(*Andropogon gerardii*)
 - switchgrass
(*Panicum virgatum*)
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For more information on native grasses for wildlife and for forage, contact Tim Dunne, NRCS Biologist, in Clinton, NJ, at 908-735-0733 x 104 or at tim.dunne@nj.usda.gov

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Native Warm Season Grasses



**A Benefit for
Wildlife
and for
Agricultural
Producers**



Helping People Help the Land

Native Grasses: Providing Forage for New Jersey Livestock

Recently several New Jersey producers with livestock have successfully baled hay from native grasses to feed to their herds. Hay producers have reported high yields of native grass hay, harvested in mid-summer after most grassland wildlife nesting is complete. These have sold as well as traditional hay crops like orchardgrass, timothy and brome grass.

Woody Reid, a grain and hay farmer from Everittstown, Hunterdon County, harvested about 150 bales per acre of native warm season grass hay in early August 2006 from a field seeded in the spring of 2005.

The field was enrolled in the NJ DEP Division of Fish & Wildlife's Landowner Incentive Program (LIP). Fields enrolled in LIP are seeded down to a wildlife-friendly mixture of native warm season grasses. The fields cannot be harvested until after July 15th each year and at least 20% of the grasses seeded must be left standing over the winter to provide important winter wildlife cover.

Landowners participating in LIP can receive up to 75% of the costs of native grass establishment. They also receive a rental payment each year of the five-year enrollment period while they grow native grasses exclusively and delay harvest until after July 15th.

Mr. Reid noted that the native warm-season grass fields were 5'-6' tall and he was a little worried about cutting, raking and baling the tall thick stand of native grasses, but he reported that he had no problems. The grasses dried quickly and the hay was sold to local livestock producer Harry Swift in Milford. Most of the 2400



bales have already been fed to Swift's horses, ponies and the beef animals on his farm. Harry reported that the hay was excellent quality and readily eaten by his livestock.

Len Clifford in Knowlton Township, Warren County, also has experienced harvesting and feeding native grass hay. Len enrolled some of his family's farm into the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) administered by NRCS in 1999 to convert several old hay fields into more valuable wildlife habitat.

With technical and financial assistance from NRCS, Mr. Clifford seeded several fields to a mixture of indiangrass, big bluestem, little bluestem and switchgrass in the spring of 1999. The grasses were slow to establish due to dry conditions and competition from existing cool season grasses in the fields, but after two years Len was able to harvest round bales from the WHIP fields in August.

He has harvested the fields each year since 2001, and the native grass hay is fed to his cattle herd along with traditional hay crops, such as orchardgrass and brome grass. Len reports that the cows show no preference for either his traditional hay crops or the native grass hay. All the native grass hay he grows is fed each year.

Financial and Technical Assistance for New Jersey Landowners

NRCS in New Jersey has been promoting the use of native warm season grasses for the past 10 years under the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP). The US Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS), one of our partners in wildlife habitat enhancement for private lands, has also been encouraging landowners to seed these native grasses for about 10-12 years. In the last 2-3 years the native grass restoration has also been at the forefront of the NJ DEP Division of Fish & Wildlife's Landowner Incentive Program (LIP).

NRCS in New Jersey has partnered with NJ DEP Division of Fish and Wildlife to provide some of the funding for site preparation, seeding and management of these wildlife-friendly crops on land enrolled in the LIP program. The FWS provides seed and a native grass seed drill for planting the fluffy non-traditional seeds for these projects.

Many fields have been seeded to native grasses with assistance from NRCS and US FWS since 1998 and by the NJ DEP Division of Fish & Wildlife since 2005. Most are not harvested for forage, but were established solely for wildlife. Significantly more fields could be harvested for the valuable forage resource under these wildlife programs.

Next year NRCS plans to have some of the native grass hay crops analyzed by a forage lab to help document hay quality.

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